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Politically Speaking

Budget proposal shows mayor's selective memory

By James Bush

Promises are perishable.

That's the message Mayor Greg Nickels is sending in his proposed 2005-2006 budget.

Perhaps the bad economic times are getting to Greg: when there's plenty to go around, the mayor's power to propose the budget puts him in the enviable position of dishing out the sugar; when cuts are required, all Nickels gets to do is pass on the pain.

About \$2 million in cuts proposed by Nickels remain in play as council members look to reinstate various funds trimmed by the executive's budget ax.

Council member Tom Rasmussen is leading the effort to reinstate \$318,000 in human service funding cut by Nickels. Here, the mayor is making a point by targeting administrative and support funding, while protecting money to provide direct services to low-income residents. He's especially dismissive of the past practice of giving city money to programs that lobby other levels of government.

It's likely that most every penny of the proposed social service cuts will be restored—this time. But, barring a quick economic rebound, the Council may someday soon be forced to choose between direct service funding and continuing allocations such as \$93,000 to the Statewide Poverty Action Network (which lobbies state government for more services for low-income people).

But Nickels, who prides himself on his political instincts, is developing the bad habit of eliminating existing programs so he can start his own. What kind of logic justifies a \$162,000 cut from the Parks Department's very successful late night youth activity program? Has the tension over police shootings really eased to the point that we should slash funding for the watchdog Office of Professional Accountability? Why are we making further cuts to the family support centers (ending a \$50,000 program for teen parents), which only one mayoral administration ago were a marquee city function?

There's no doubt that times change and people forget, but for Nickels, everything that happened before he took office in January 2002 seems like ancient history. Remember the late John Stanford, military man turned Seattle Schools superintendent, stumping for

"Project Liftoff," a public/private opportunity fund for early learning and after school programs? Well, the program is now called SOAR, and Nickels is proposing to zero out the city's \$125,000 contribution, much to the dismay of the private participants.

It's been only about five years since the feds handed over the remainder of the former Sand Point Naval Station in order to expand Magnuson Park. But Nickels seems to have forgotten. His budget would eliminate the entire \$130,000 allocation to the Sand Point Community Housing Association, which operates the 92 units of low-income housing at Magnuson Park and is slated to build another 100 units. While the housing association has admittedly been slow to get the additional units into the development pipeline, proposing to cut adrift nearly 100 low-income families making the transition from homelessness is irresponsible. Nickels' aides should have figured out some compromise, not simply thrown the whole issue into the council's lap.

Of course, many of the challenges presented by the budget process can't be blamed on anyone. Take the proposed elimination of the Seattle Public Library's bookmobile program. There's a reasonable financial argument behind the cut: the per-book cost of using mobile services to distribute materials to senior centers, senior residents and shut-ins is more than four times that of the smallest library branch. It also allows the library to absorb a big financial hit (\$800,000) without affecting core services. But no self-respecting politician is going to sign off on a proposal that so devastates the senior population. Expect the council to fund a scaled-down version of the mobile services program.

Granted, Nickels' political savvy can be downright refreshing. You had to appreciate the way he graciously let former Mayor Paul Schell rush the Woodland Park Zoo agreement (which included a pledge of city funds for an expensive underground parking garage) through City Council in the waning days of his administration. Then, he stuck the zoo folks with a cut-rate garage, arguing that it was Schell's agreement, not his.

But when this same trick is played on the public, it's not quite as funny.

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Council members will propose specific budget changes in early November, with Budget Committee votes scheduled for Nov. 12. The council will adopt the final budget by Nov. 29.